

Attachment D

SUICIDE RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

RISK FACTORS

Understanding risk factors can help dispel the myths that suicide is a random act or results from stress alone. Some persons are particularly vulnerable to suicide and suicidal self-injury because they have more than one mental disorder present, such as depression with alcohol abuse. They may also be very impulsive and/or aggressive, and use highly lethal methods to attempt suicide. The importance of certain risk factors and their combination vary by age, gender, and ethnicity.

The impact of some risk factors can be reduced by interventions. Those risk factors that cannot be changed (such as a previous suicide attempt) can alert others to the heightened risk of suicide during periods of recurrence of a mental or substance abuse disorder, or following a significant stressful life event.

Risk factors include:

- < Previous suicide attempt
- < Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder
- < Co-occurring mental and alcohol and substance abuse disorders
- < Family history of suicide
- < Threats of suicide
- < Hopelessness
- < Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- < Barriers to accessing mental health treatment
- < Relational, social, work, or financial loss
- < Physical illness
- < Easy access to lethal methods, especially guns
- < Unwillingness to seek help because of stigma attached to mental disorders, substance abuse disorders, and/or suicidal thoughts
- < Influence of significant people - family members, celebrities, peers who have died by suicide - both through direct personal contact or

- inappropriate media representations
- < Cultural and religious beliefs - for instance, the belief that suicide is a noble resolution of a personal dilemma
- < Local epidemics of suicide that have a contagious influence
- < Isolation, a feeling of being cut off from other people

Adverse life events in combination with other strong risk factors such as mental or substance abuse disorders and impulsivity, may lead to suicide. However, suicide is not a normal response to the stresses experienced by most people. Many people experience one or more risk factors and are not suicidal.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors can include an individual's genetic or neurobiological makeup, attitudinal and behavioral characteristics, and environmental attributes. Measures that enhance resilience or protective factors are as essential as risk reduction in preventing suicide. Positive resistance to suicide is not permanent, so programs that support and maintain protection against suicide should be ongoing.

Protective factors include:

- < Effective and appropriate clinical care for mental disorders, physical disorders, and substance abuse disorders.
- < Easy access to a variety of clinical interventions and support for help seeking.
- < Restricted access to highly lethal methods of suicide.
- < Family and community support.
- < Support from ongoing medical and mental health care relationships.
- < Learned skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, and nonviolent handling of disputes.
- < Cultural and religious beliefs that discourage suicide and support self-preservation instincts.

Source: U.S. Public Health Service, *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide*. Washington, D.C.: 1999.